

Accelerated degrees: an institutional experience – the (beyond NSS) student perspective

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This conference paper was presented at the SRHE Annual Research Conference: Creativity, Criticality and Conformity in Higher Education - Celtic Manor, Newport, Wales, United Kingdom, 11-13 December 2019

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (All Submissions)

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Chaired by Michelle Morgan

Thu 12 Dec 2019

09:00 - 09:30

Accelerated degrees – an institutional experience – the (beyond NSS) student perspective

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Research Domain: Student experiences (SE)

Abstract: Accelerated degrees have existed within global higher education for many decades, but have become topical in the UK due to Government desires for more universities to offer degree study in this format (UK Government, 2017; DfE, 2019). More flexible learner models to match more diverse student populations are some of the underpinning drivers.

Abertay University has piloted a suite of accelerated degree programmes since 2015 with built-in annual reviews designed to examine the staff and student experience of engagement with this study route. In 2019 a more in-depth survey was instigated to provide a broader understanding of motivators for students pursuing the accelerated pathway, as well as ascertaining (through qualitative dialogue) a description of their study experience. Responses were compared with those on the non-accelerated forms of the same degree programmes. This session will provide Abertay context to this study route and explore the student experience from a non-NSS perspective.

Paper: In January 2019 the UK Government passed legislation in Parliament supporting the expansion of two year, fast-track accelerated degrees (DfE, 2019). The proposal outlined an adjusted funding structure which reduced the student overall fee, and when accompanied by reduced associated student costs, was felt to be an attractive study alternative with lower costs to the public purse.

A number of UK institutions already offer an undergraduate Honours two year study option (3 years in Scotland) (Pollard, Hadjivassiliou, Swift & Green, 2017) and the desire to offer flexible modes of study has been in existence in the UK higher education system for quite some time with accompanying reviews giving insight into demographics, demand, and student and employer perceptions of the delivery format (Outram, 2011; Pollard et al, 2017). However, a 'niche market' narrative tends to accompany accelerated degree delivery (Tallantyre, 2013).

Context

Abertay University has offered six undergraduate accelerated degree programmes since 2015 and the author has been tracking enrolments and the student experience since their inception. An externally run marketing exercise pre-dated the accelerated degree delivery, to test demand, and subsequent to this each of the four academic Schools opted to offer minimally one programme in this format as part of a pilot exercise. In tandem, a tuitions fee and student finance model was negotiated with the Scottish Funding Council.

The programme structures were such that students studied a traditional two term study model in their first year of enrolment, switching to a three term model for the remaining two years of study. Early evaluations raised issues relating to accessibility of staff and parity of the student experience during term 3. Consequently, programme teams took time to explain to the students the operational 'differences' between the two study routes for example, the use of block study periods, and the alternate project experience.

In 2019, after four years of implementation, a more extensive review of the programmes was undertaken. Ethics permission was gained in order to conduct an anonymous online survey of students who were either involved with or had the potential to be involved with an accelerated degree programme.

Method

A link to an online questionnaire was sent by e-mail to the 502 students who were eligible to be enrolled on an accelerated route. Students were asked to indicate if they were studying an accelerated mode, and if so, what had been their motivation for pursuing this option and what had been their experience to date of the programme. Respondents who had not chosen the accelerated route were asked for their reasons for not selecting this mode, and were similarly asked to provide details of their study experience.

Results and Discussion

Eighty-six students responded to the survey, 30 of whom identified as on an accelerated route. The primary driver for selecting this study mode was the opportunity to enter the graduate employment market earlier. Mature students were particularly likely to cite this as an influencing factor. The financial saving from one less year of study was also an incentive, and quite a number of students (n=7) stated that they '*wanted to use the summer more effectively*'. In contrast, the most cited reason for not pursuing the accelerated route was a desire to '*not rush*' degree studies coupled with a stated intent to use the summer vacation to gain relevant work experience. Some felt that taking this study option would result in them having '*too many things to juggle*' and there were also perceptions of there being no specific benefit, as well as that it would be a more '*difficult*' and '*stressful*' mode of study. These sentiments align with the work of others in that some state that studies should not be rushed (Hunt, 2017) viewing the vacation period as developmentally important. However, others have questioned the real utility of a summer break to the academic learner (Harvey, Power & Wilson, 2017). It is posited that the inbuilt continuity that accompanies this study route supports better retention and immersion in the discipline by accelerated learners (Kuiper, Solomonides & Hardy, 2015; Ellis & Sawyer, 2009). Degree outcomes are at least the same, if not significantly better than

those on non-accelerated programmes (Johnson & Rose, 2015). Indeed in the study group, 89% achieved their degree (in contrast to 77% for their non-accelerated peers) and 82% gained an upper second or first class honours award (60% for the non-accelerated cohorts).

Substantially higher proportions of the study group would be classified as mature (58% compared to 29% of all Abertay undergraduates) (applying the Higher Education Statistics Agency metric of > age 21). Previous studies have noted that older (Kucsera & Zimmaro, 2010) and more motivated, pro-active and high achieving students (Outram, 2011; Collins, Hay & Heiner, 2013) will opt for this study pathway meaning that it can be difficult to determine whether better student engagement, and the consequent degree outcomes, are a result of lifecycle stage, personal characteristics or the delivery mode.

Student commentary was wholly positive - accelerated students had experienced smaller class sizes and this was viewed as an enabler of more focussed learning. One student stated that their programme had been: *'Fast. Fun. But enjoyable with a few tears along the way'*.

While students did use adjectives such as *'intense'* and *'challenging'* to describe their experience these were still reflected as good features with some also describing their experience as *'rewarding'*. Only one student described their experience as *'awful'*, another as *'unsuccessful'* and a further student commented that it has been *'stressful'*. The vast majority (64%) of respondents pursuing non-accelerated routes used the terms *'good'*, *'enjoyed'*, *'enjoying'* in narrating their programme experience – *'stimulating'* and *'interesting'* were also dominant terms. However, apart from the reference to the positive aspects of the smaller class sizes from accelerated students, there was little difference in student experience commentary between the two groups.

While Abertay is opting not to extend the pilot phase of their current accelerated routes there are evident student experience enhancements from this study mode.

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